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SUBJECT: CORRECTED FOR PUNCTUATION -- HONG KONG PROFESSORS
COMMENT ON MAINLAND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Classified By: Acting Consul General Christopher Marut
for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Hong Kong academics believe that, while discussion of even sensitive topics can reach striking levels of candor, the Communist Party (CCP) offers powerful incentives to keep academia in line. The "stick" is that academics rely on government-provided consulting projects and speaking engagements for supplementary income, which discourages them from stepping out of line. The "carrots" are the social networking advantages of Party membership, which have allowed the CCP to co-opt leading professors and graduate students. While some foreign-trained Ph.D.'s are helping to spur increased openness after returning to the PRC, most revert to a more cautious line when they come home. That said, our contacts believe the trend is towards greater academic freedom despite periodic setbacks. End Summary.

¶12. (C) We spoke with six professors, all of whom have had extensive contact with Mainland universities, researchers, or graduate students, for their assessment of the current state of academic freedom in the PRC. Professors Richard Cullen and Fu Hualing at the University of Hong Kong's School of Law both monitor rule of law issues on the Mainland. Fu is also running some legal training programs on the Mainland using a DRL grant. Professor John Burns is a 30-year veteran of HKU's Department of Politics and Public Administration. Professor Jean-Pierre Cabestan is head of the Department of Government and International Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBPU). Professor Joseph Yu-shek Cheng teaches Political Science at the City University of Hong Kong (City U). Professor Anthony Spires teaches in the Department of Sociology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and serves as associate director of the Centre for Civil Society Studies, where he researches the development of NGOs on the Mainland.

Say What You Want, Beware What You Publish

¶13. (C) Our contacts agreed that, while discussion ranged freely at Mainland universities, publication was more constrained. HKU's Cullen told us he was surprised by the "candor of discussion" he found on the Mainland, while HKBPU's Cabestan described students he met at Tsinghua University as often "brazen in their questioning" on politically-charged topics such as multiparty democracy. Burns' assessment was more restrained, noting that while there were pockets of "anything goes" in the natural sciences, there was predictably less freedom in the social sciences. Among the subjects with political or policy implications, economic disciplines have enjoyed the most freedom. Our contacts believed economists were given extra leeway as a result of deliberate policy to promote China's economic growth.

¶14. (C) With academic salaries low even at prestigious universities, the bulk of most professors' incomes is derived from consulting projects, speaking engagements, and moonlighting as instructors at for-profit institutions.

Mainland professors also commonly use grant money as remuneration. Given that most grants are offered by government ministries such as the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) and the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST), professors and researchers must practice self-censorship to avoid losing their income.

Join the Party

¶ 15. (C) In addition to the risk of lost income, the Party can also dangle the benefits of membership, and the high CCP membership rates at leading institutions illustrate the degree to which the Party has succeeded in co-opting academia. Cheng posited that Jiang Zemin's efforts to widen the Party support base worked so well to draw in top intellectuals that faculty members would side with the government if undergraduates incited any type of mass protest similar to Tiananmen. HKU's Burns sees more enlightened self-interest than political indoctrination. Although most of his Mainland academic contacts at Peking University -- both graduate students and professors -- were CCP members, Burns contended that Chinese intellectuals were pragmatists who joined the CCP for the social networking advantages, not ideology.

¶ 16. (C) While CCP membership is common only at elite institutions, support for the one-party system is widespread in Mainland academic institutions. Believing that the Party is here to stay, some professors take a pragmatic approach in opting to work within the system to effect gradual change.

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Other professors, Fu asserted, credit the one-party model with China's economic progress over the past three decades. That said, Fu also told us critics were becoming more vocal. In the past, a single telephone call from state security was enough to silence a dissenting voice, but today professors were much bolder. Fu predicted that these trends would lead to polarization between a pro-government majority and a dissenting minority on most campuses.

¶ 17. (C) While Chinese who earn their Ph.D.'s overseas may return with more liberal ideas, our contacts judged that they return to a more narrow intellectual space, and many fade back into the system. Burns described "academic freedom by stealth," whereby foreign-earned Ph.D.'s publish internationally, often in English, but operate within the system at home. Burns also admitted that many of these newly-minted Ph.D.'s "reverted" to the party line as soon as they returned to China, and could not be counted on as catalysts for social or political change. Fu agreed, adding that few returnees were politically active since most had been busy doing scientific research abroad and did not acquire a thorough understanding of Western political culture.

Stability First

¶ 18. (C) Although the PRC has largely co-opted academia, our contacts believe the Party still faces a conundrum. On one hand, there is a fear that unfettered academic freedom could unleash a "color revolution." On the other hand, scientific inquiry requires collaboration and access to information to reach its full potential. At present, our contacts believe the government is failing to curtail the former while hindering the latter. In spite of periodic setbacks, academic freedom has grown over the past twenty years and continues to do so, albeit haltingly. The mood of academia in general is less confrontational than in the 1980s, but the critics that do exist are much harder to silence, noted Fu. Meanwhile, Chinese research in both the natural and social sciences suffers from a self-imposed cap on the free exchange and dissemination of ideas.

